DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 380 CE 071 861

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TITLE Successful Spelling Strategies for Adult Learners. Michigan Adult Education Practitioner Inquiry Project 1994.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Basic Education; Educational Research; *Educational Strategies; Remedial Instruction; Spelling; *Spelling Instruction

ABSTRACT

A study explored new approaches to teaching spelling to adult learners. The first step was to examine the research on teaching spelling to identify the spelling problems and strategies that were most successful when teaching poor spellers. These strategies were identified: use of spelling lists; correction of own tests; systematic teaching; careful diagnosis; guided practice; spelling strategies most adaptable to the personal learning style; word study; frequent writing; and phonetic realization. The second step was to apply two new approaches to spelling. A spelling/vocabulary class would be divided into three groups based on a series of assessments. The average group that read/spelled at an eighth-grade level would use the systematic approach. Advanced spellers above eighth-grade level would read materials at their appropriate reading level and respond in writing to questions. Their writing would be analyzed on an individual basis for common spelling errors and appropriate methods would be used to correct it. The third group that scored below eighth grade would use a spelling crutch and a systematic phonetic instruction. Although the study was not conducted, several conclusions were drawn: student spelling problems should be carefully analyzed; materials should coordinate with student learning styles and needs; instant feedback would encourage success; and teaching spelling patterns and providing phonetic analysis using an integrated approach where reading and writing are included would help make an effective spelling program. Contains 17 references. (YLB)

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ED 401 380

SUCCESSFUL SPELLING STRATEGIES FOR ADULT LEARNERS

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INTRODUCTION

The University of Michigan had a football player by the name of Biakiavatuka. This undoubtedly is a difficult name to spell, let alone pronounce. As a teacher of adult students teaching a course called Spelling/Vocabulary had me perplexed as to how does one teaches this skill so there is a lasting carry over in the years that follow formal education.

In the American Heritage School Dictionary, spelling is defined as naming or writing in order the letters forming a word or part of a word. Paul Gentry, author of Spelling Is A Four Letter Word, stated that spelling is a complex cognitive process, not a simple memorization task.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Many questions come to my mind when assessing spelling. How does one assess spelling? How do address the spelling needs of each student?
What spelling program would best provide and meet the needs of students who are poor spellers?

WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY IS THE BEST WAY TO TEACH SPELLING?

To address this question I turned to research on spelling and the adult learner to identify the spelling problems and strategies that were most successful when teaching poor spellers.

1 . Adults Need Systematic Instruction

Anderson (1985) reports on several approaches specifically geared to teach spelling to adults. She states that adults who are poor spellers seem to use a minimum number of strategies. When adults spell they rely primarily on a phonological and surface-level information. These adults have not learned to internalize information about underlying rules for spelling. As a result they fail to use these rules when appropriate. Anderson (1985) also asserts that older students who are poor spellers need systematic instruction especially where there is a change in both spelling and in the pronunciation of a word. For examples, the words,"explain" and "explanation" vary in how they are pronounced and spelled helps students make connections between words they already know.

2. Reduce Number of Words Learned

Gettinger (1984) states that for the less able students reducing the number of words they need to learn is helpful. She also mentioned that poor spellers need to study the words first before they take a test.

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3. Adults Have Poor Decoding Skills

Viise (1994) whose research on "Adult Spelling Development" found that adult learners with reading failures have the problem of identifying or decoding words and therefore of spelling these words correctly. Viise(1994) also mentions high evidence among adult learners who leave out entire syllables or syllable sounds. As a result, when spelling four or five syllable words they do not correctly represent all of the vowels in the words.

4. Use Placement Tests

Another strategy used to improve spelling was Placement Tests. For example, researchers found a direct correlation between improved spelling and the use of Placement Tests. Viise (1994) states that the key lies in careful diagnosis of students. They need the kind of lists which can pinpoint developmental word knowledge. Routman's (1991), book "Invitations" supports using Placement Tests to assess students. She states that the test can be a combination of words from the standardized school list along with high frequency word lists. But the words need to be familiar to the students in meaning and pronunciation.

When developing word lists for assessment, Johnson, Langford, and Quorn,(1981) studies show that the lists should contain words that frequently cause problems for the students. Viise (1994) found in her research that these Placement Tests can borrow from or be patterned after children's tests since all learners follow a similar pattern of phonetic realizations and to a lesser degree the acquisition of visual patterns.

One advantage for using Placement Tests which Johnson, Langford, Quorn, (1981) found that placement Tests helped students begin the spelling program with challenging yet not too difficulty words. Through the use of Placement Tests, unnecessary words which the student already knows how to spell are eliminated.

Viise (1994) found that the key to spelling success was not in the added years of school, but in a program built around careful assessment and providing appropriate level of instruction. Graham(1983) also agrees with careful diagnosis and instruction. She states it is important to carefully monitor and assess student progress by using informal and standardized tests frequently and periodically.

Fitzsimmons and Boomer (1978) support these findings by stating that only after a careful reading/spelling level assessment of students has been completed with appropriate instructional material will an overall increase in spelling occur.

5. Use Words Students Misspell

In developing an effective program Distefano and Haggerty (1985) found that by using words students ask to spell, using words students often misspell, and using words the teacher knows they need in order to spell well is an effective way to teach spelling meaningfully. Johnson, Langford, Quorn (1981) found that by elimination words students know, as well as too difficult words students were more successful.

6. Don't Ignore Early Confusion of Spelling

Research states according to Usiskin, (1989) that teachers should not ignore early confusion of spelling words. Westbury (1993) states that it is important that the program materials chosen without regard for individual reading abilities makes instruction of spelling for many students ineffective.

7. Use Spelling Lists

Horn(1969) in his research stressed four advantages for learning spelling words by lists, (I) students learned more quickly, (2) students remembered longer, (3) and students were able to transfer more readily to new contexts. (4) students could focus on each and every word.

In support of teaching spelling lists Storie and Willems (1981) mention that when a student was presented and tested with words from a list, the student was more successful, than if the words were presented in sentences or paragraphs.

8. Let Students Correct Own Tests

According to Graham(1983) students should correct their own tests. Student achievement went up when they corrected their own tests. Horn(1991) concluded in his findings that allowing students to correct just their test contributed to a 90%-95% achievement, but the author goes on to give a word of caution - stating that when students correct their own tests it should be under direct teacher supervision. Another study done by Gettinger (1984) states that immediate feedback of the test results provides the most benefit.

9. Apply Spelling Research Findings To Teaching

Another suggestion to improve spelling instruction is mentioned by authors Storie and Willems (1981) They state that effective teachers should apply the findings in spelling research to the classroom. As a result the learning by the students would improve and classroom decisions would not be done by just by trial and error.

10. Connect Spelling To Real World

Besides using research to determine effective ways of teaching spelling successfully, Storie and Willems (1981) state that teachers should provide for a systematic teaching of spelling and connecting it to the real world in meaningful ways.

11. Provide Guided Practice

Another component of a successful program is the guided practice. Fitzsimmons and Boomer (1978)state in their research that when a teacher uses an overhead projector to point out patterns and generalizations of words and the students follow along, student learning improves.

Another finding states that distributed practice will result in longer retention of the material to be learned. Practice periods should be scheduled close together when first learning something and then the practice schedule should be further and further apart. At first practice periods should be short and intense to be efficient and effective. According to research done by Horn

(1969) time allotted for spelling instruction should be between 60 and 75 minutes per week.

12. Know Student's Learning Style

One method to remediate the spelling difficulty is through using techniques which are most adaptable to the student's learning style. Alley and Dishler (1979) reported that spelling must allow a person to develop a type of visual or auditory image that will be clear enough to give him or her all the details of the word , because correct spelling requires the exact reproduction of the word with all the elements in specific order. If a learner is auditory or kinesthetic, Fernald's multisensory approach is useful. This method uses a look-say-do approach which requires spellers to look at the word, say the word, and write the word (by either tracing/writing or simply writing). Fernald(revised, 1988) method is based on several hundred cases of poor speilers, who were either auditory or kinesthetic learners in word recall.

Another strategy or tool to help compensate for spelling difficulty is the hand-held computer aid called "Spellmaster, a hand-held computer aid which has an advanced phonetic spelling corrector. Franklin Spelling Ace is another such tool, which is a hand-held electronic dictionary-thesaurus and spell checker.

13. Teach an Effective Method of Studying Words

Some specific suggestions for a sound spelling program include the use of an effective method of studying the words. Hunter's "White Sauce Recipe" can be used most effectively when following these guidelines. It consists of three basic steps: (I) input- tell pupils in language form for left brainers, 2) model - show students for right brainers, and (3) check for understanding to ensure pupils understand, by exhibiting the appropriate behavior and intended outcomes in spelling (Hunter, 1984)

14. Have An Active Writing Program

Quorton (1984) states that spelling competency is not developed by memorizing a word list each week. Pupils must be involved in an active writing program in all areas of the curriculum, not just spelling. They need many opportunities to use spelling words in everyday writing experiences. (Johnson, Langford, Quorn , 1981). In support of this research finding Gentry, echoes the same opinion , " The real foundation for spelling is frequent writing."

15. Phonetic Realization of Adult Students

Viise (1994) notes that phonetic realizations are the determining issue in identifying the developmental progress of a speller. Adults like children follow a developmental pattern of spelling acquisition especially in the area of phonetic realizations. Spelling features on this developmental pattern cannot be bypassed. When the developmental pattern is ignored, deviant spellings creep into adult writings characterized by lack of phonetic attachment to the target word. In 1993 Worthy and Viise revealed a strong tendency for adults who were struggling spellers to make nonphonetic substitutions for words or parts of words. The spells of the adults

also included a great number of superfluous letters such as chein for chin, shout for shut, as well as . Words were memorized but scrambled letters (dlloar for dollar, scracht for scratch, frinedns for friends). It appeared that these adults had developed coping skills which substituted familiar visual patterns or memorized letters for careful phonetic judgement. When teaching spelling, Viise states that one needs to treat certain groups of features as units which can be considered together when planning spelling instruction.

Chomsky (1970) states one way to improve spelling is to build on existing vocabulary words and help the students make connections between words such ad bomb and bombard. Another strategy which benefits students according to Frith (1980) is to provide systematic study of some of the more common Greek and Latin roots.

Oates (1989) writes that the best method to remediate spelling difficulties is through techniques most adaptable to the person's learning style. For an adult who has a severe spelling problem, Oates suggests using a spelling tool such as the"Spellmaster," a hand-held computer aid which has an advanced phonetic spelling corrector or the computer aid,"Spelling Ace" by Franklin. a hand-held electronic dictionary - thesaurus and spell checker which can help a student. (Fitzsimmons and Boomer, 1978) state that only after a careful reading level assessment of students has been completed can a job of reading manuals and instructional materials be judged as appropriate or inappropriate. Once this has been assessed, than the use of only appropriate materials will bring about an overall increase in reading/spelling. Oates concludes in her article, "Hope For Adult Learning Disabled Spellers" that several techniques and strategies along with coping tools are needed in all written communications.

INQUIRY QUESTION AND PROCEDURE

As I found, research covered a wide range of findings on teaching spelling, and yet I felt I needed to test the materials I had been using and apply two new approaches to spelling in order to make recommendations for change.

METHOD

It was decided that my spelling/vocabulary class would be part of this study to find out which approach to teaching spelling would provide success and long-term learning for adult students. First , a series of assessments in reading and spelling would be given. This would include the TABE Form D, reading comprehension, spelling and vocabulary sections. A spelling test separate from the TABE would also be given and each student would submit a writing sample.

Next the class would be divided into three groups. One group would use a systematic approach using the spelling book called, "Spelling Mastery" (grade 8). Another group who had severe spelling problems would use a spelling crutch. This would be the Franklin Speller" or "Spelling Ace" along with phonetic analysis of words, and the third group who would be the more advanced spellers who would read materials at their appropriate reading level and then respond to it in writing. Their writing would be analyzed on an individual basis for common threads of spelling errors that appeared in their writing and appropriate tools would be used to correct it.

Due to a job change to a Reading Specialist in a public high school, I wasn't able to implement this plan. I felt I would still like to do this research using some of the research methods with my new position. For example, I would like to use the "Crutch " Spelling Ace or Spell Master with some of my more disabled readers and writers to see if there is a significant change in their spelling and writing.

CONCLUSIONS

What does all this research say about poor adult spellers? Spelling is a complex process. In order to have an effective program, a careful analysis of students' spelling problems should include a good placement test with careful diagnosis. Each student should be provided appropriate materials appropriate to their learning styles and needs. Closely monitoring students' spelling with instant feedback to the student is helpful. Using real world experiences provided in their everyday writing, along with spelling crutches are ways successful spelling programs make a difference. In addition, spelling should be systematic in its approach and the weekly time spent on spelling should be about 75 minutes. Finally, teaching patterns, phonic analysis along with an integrated approach where reading and writing are included help make a spelling program effective.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to study the research on teaching spelling, so that our methods as a teacher are based on scientific study and not on ones own personal reaction to a situation, or to use a method because,"we've always done it this way". Due to the wide range of individual differences in a classroom, a variety of methods can be used. The chronic speller needs a slower paced, careful analysis of their problem, along with materials and instruction which are carefully monitored in order to see results. On the other hand, the more advanced spellers could use literature, or workplace materials such as writing memos, summarizing, and journal writing to develop a larger vocabulary. Spending 75 minutes a week seems to be what research says is best. When one teaches a spelling class that is 180 minutes (such as a once a week adult night class) than a teacher needs to look into providing opportunities to apply newly developed spelling skills to word games and activities appropriately and successfully to strengthen and enhance the long term retention of spelling words. (Fitzsimmons and Boomer 1978)

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